

# iPhones, Flesh, and the Word

***F.B.I.*  
at Arturo Bandini**

**September 25–  
October 23, 2015**

If you were lucky enough to receive a text message invitation the day before, you may have found yourself at the opening for *F.B.I.*, an eight person exhibition at Arturo Bandini, a parking-lot-cum-exhibition space in Mt. Washington. When I asked for a press release, the gallery co-founders responded with a rehearsed, perhaps even glib email: “We don’t do press-releases, just text messages.” While this sort of invite-only exclusivity can be problematic, Bandini founders Michael Dopp and Isaac Resnikoff have a pension for stunted, byte-sized poetic language. Exhibition titles such as *Thank You PF Changs* or *Ansel Addams Family Values* are punny and evocative and surely part of this strategy. The title *F.B.I.* contains a racy euphemism: *Female Body Inspector*. Combined with its more obvious reference to federal police forces, the title casts a gruesome flavor over the work presented, which all happened to include depictions of male or female bodies.

The 14 × 8 foot space is an impermanent outdoor/indoor hybrid structure. For *F.B.I.*, a small pedestal

appendage was added in the gallery’s iconic white stucco exterior to support Ken Tam’s sculptural torso work. The gallery’s body, like a starfish, loses or gains limbs as needed, while its mass increases as more stucco—or “putz” as the gallerists are fond of calling it—gets slopped on after each exhibition; an aesthetic design of the architecture, but also a brilliantly convenient solution for wall patching. Its exterior walls are protected by a sizable overhang that supports the gallery’s dramatic fluorescents. It’s no accident that this lighting system improves the visual quality of the work exhibited when viewed online.<sup>1</sup> The gallery’s preferred mode of presentation caters to digital platforms, like Instagram.

That each Bandini experience starts with a smartphone is particularly pertinent to the works in *F.B.I.*, which the curators dubbed “the body parts show.” Smart phones are our secondary appendages, kept conveniently in back pockets. In his book *Neomaterialism*, Joshua Simon explains that our bodily connections to our electronic devices go beyond just the storage of mental information. Our devices are “self-portraits... iPhones and iPads are dominated by shiny buttonless surfaces...The traces of our body on these screens and surfaces leave marks by our fingers and hands caressing and touching them.”<sup>2</sup> Our phones literally become depositories for pieces of ourselves: oils and body fats.

Simon also discusses Apple’s brand mixture of temptation and knowledge manifested in their logo, which alludes to the forbidden fruit

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of Genesis. Similarly to Adam and Eve, who covered their bodies with fig leaves after realizing they were naked, we cover our iPhones with cases and protective layers. They are too fragile and erotic to be exposed.

Like Adam and Eve, post-original-sin, the bodies in *F.B.I.* seemed to be coming to terms with their own sexuality, while also contending with their physical mortality. Chanel Von Habsburg-Lothringen's digital photo collage, *Granny Lingerie* (2015), displayed an alluring mix of covering and exposure. The piece greeted visitors, and acted as a sort of emblem for the exhibition: two women wearing nude color masks pose over a background of breasts clad in a light pink Playtex bra. The women in the foreground stand awkwardly, the older of the two wearing orthopedic shoes and attempting an awkward *contrapposto*, while her youthful counterpart bends down into a half-squat. The distorted perceptual field of the photograph disrupts notions of stable bodies, and instead flirts with our physical limitations. This is the body in various stages of health and decay.

Masks were a potent signifier elsewhere in the exhibition. Roni Shneior's *Candle Holder* (2014) sat dismissed in the corner of the parking lot, as if it has been placed in a time-out. The piece is a two-sided ceramic face from the upper lip down, its mouth agape on either side. A lit candle rests inside the head, and the piece is tilted so that molten wax drips cum-like from the mouth on one side, and spew aggressively from the other. Akin to a mask's ability to either conceal or heighten emotion, in Shneior's hands, sexuality and banality meld into a seamless dichotomy, all installed atop a dusty paint-bucket-pedestal.

Shana Lutker presented the body with a more fragmented and

symbolic approach in *Creation Matters (with Noses)* (2015). Flesh-colored cartoonish ceramic noses—or are they phalluses?—are tacked atop a mirror whose vinyl text reads: *Dear M., Creation Matters Little to Us*. The title-case sentence acts like a title of a book or essay: a manifesto that rails against Creation, whether Biblical or artistic. The formal similarities between phallus and nose mirror both appendages' ability to exert status and power (i.e., turning up one's nose).

Inside the gallery space, was Roni Shneior's *Untitled* (2015) robotic sculpture—a skin-colored oval mass outfitted with a blinking doll eye. The work's stilted robotics are haunting and sad, like a post-traumatic All Seeing Eye. The piece emitted loud metronomic clicks like a calculated pacing device for moving through the exhibition. The monotonous sound ominously ticked away the time, as if a reminder of our slow march towards death.

Perhaps, though, the most palpable body in the exhibition was the gallery space itself. All the works in the show had to contend with and adhere to its back. It was in part due to Bandini's monolithic/heroic architecture and harsh fluorescent lighting that the bodies in *F.B.I.* felt so abject. By comparison to Bandini's fertile, pure, and stable surface, the bodies on view were limp, decaying, and caught in various stages of longing. If the artworks were collectively Eve, ashamed of her sexuality and aware of her changing body, Bandini was God, overbearing and omnipresent. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was a text message.

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*F.B.I.* (installation view) (2015).  
Image courtesy of Arturo Bandini.

1. A recent article in *X-Tra* tracked the upswing of digital art platforms like *Artsy* and *Contemporary Art Daily*, and the effects that normalizing our digital art viewing experience has had on many gallery environments, who are replacing traditional spotlighting with

a more homogenized fluorescent. Enxuto, João and Erica Love, "Genetic Drift: Artsy and the Future of Art." *X-Tra* Winter 2015, Volume 17 Number 2.

2. Simon, Joshua. *Neomaterialism*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2013.



